DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 380 377 SO 024 698

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TITLE A Primary Source to Supplement High School History Textbooks in a Character Study of Ulysses S. Grant.
PUB DATE Jun 94
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Biographies; Characterization; *Civil War (United States); Curriculum Enrichment; High Schools; *History Instruction; *Presidents of the United States; *Primary Sources; *Secondary School Curriculum; Social Studies; Supplementary Reading Materials
IDENTIFIERS *Grant (Ulysses S); *Porter (Horace)

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of General Horace Porter, President Ulysses S. Grant's personal friend and closest adviser through the latter stages of the U.S. Civil War and into Grant's presidency. During the Civil War, Porter made field observations, suggested strategy, and relayed orders among commanders. As adviser to the president, Porter wrote draft copies of official papers and speeches on domestic and foreign policy, and on occasion, made public appearances and speeches on behalf of the president. In all of his associations with Grant, Porter took careful and elaborate notes. When Grant died in July 1885, Porter used his notes to write his memoirs of Grant. Porter's memoir of Grant is a character study and well known classic among historians. It is an intimate record of Grant's actions, his personal traits and habits, and his motives for conducting himself in a certain manner in certain situations. Porter writes about Grant's family, his religion, his personal hygiene, smoking, and his attitudes toward women, war, suffering, dying, leadership, lying, swearing, and other matters of human and personal interest to the reader. The paper discusses Horace Porter and summarizes material from his memoirs of Grant. Because high school history textbooks cover Civil War battles and strategy, and the successes and failures of Grant's presidency, but usually fail to do an adequate job with Grant as a personality, teachers and students can use Porter's classic study of Grant's personal characteristics to supplement their high school history textbooks. (DK)

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A PRIMARY SOURCE TO SUPPLEMENT HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY TEXTBOOKS IN A CHARACTER STUDY OF ULYSSES S. GRANT

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A PRIMARY SOURCE TO SUPPLEMENT HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY TEXTBOOKS IN A CHARACTER STUDY OF ULYSSES S. GRANT

High school history textbooks always cover the American Civil War and the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant. Textbooks often chronicle the Civil War in terms of battles and military strategy. Grant's presidency is a rendition of his successes and failures in domestic and foreign policy. Scant attention is given to Grant as a personality.

General Horace Porter was Grant's personal friend and close adviser through the latter stages of the Civil War and into Grant's presidency. During the Civil War, Porter made field observations, suggested strategy, and relayed orders among commanders. As adviser to the president, Porter wrote draft copies of official papers and speeches on domestic and foreign policy and, on occasion, made public appearances and speeches on behalf of the president. In all of his associations with Grant, Porter took careful and elaborate notes (Mende 1927, 150). When Grant died in July 1885, Porter used his notes to write his memoirs of Grant. His articles appeared in the late eighteen hundreds in Harper's Magazine and Century Magazine (Porter 1885, 1896). By the turn of the century, these articles had become part of a book (Porter 1897).

Porter's memoir of Grant is a character study and well-known classic among historians (Catton 1954, 192). It is an intimate

record of Grant's actions, his personal traits and habits, and his motives for conducting himself in a certain manner in certain situations. Porter writes about Grant's family, his religion and personal hygiene, his smoking, and his attitudes toward women, war, suffering, dying, leadership, lying, swearing, and other matters of human and personal interest to the reader. Generations of historians have used the memoir as a source book and anecdotal mine. Historian Bruce Catton (1954, 192) has recommended the memoir as being among the best for a portrayal of Grant's personal characteristics. Porter's writing is instructive, accurate, reliable, entertaining, animated, and powerfully descriptive. His memoirs can provide insights that neither Grant's own memoirs nor the memoirs of his wife or other individuals can provide. Grant's memoirs and many of the memoirs about Grant are not wholly character studies. Those that are character studies lack some of the details provided by Porter. Julia Grant's memoirs do not include observations of Grant in battle.

HORACE PORTER

Porter was a brilliant intellectual and a man of varied accomplishments. He was born in 1837 in Pennsylvania and died in 1921 in New York. His father, David R. Porter, was governor of Pennsylvania from 1839 to 1845. Horace Porter graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1860, third in his class. During the Civil War he was commander of artillery at the capture of Fort Pulaski, Georgia, in 1862. Next, he served with the Army

of the Potomac until after Antietam. In 1863, he took part in the battle of Chickamauga for which he later received the Medal of Honor for having temporarily checked a retreat of Union troops. In April 1864, he became Grant's aide-de-camp. Eventually, he was brevetted brigadier-general. In 1867, while Grant was President Andrew Johnson's secretary of war, Porter was Grant's assistant secretary, and from 1869 to 1873, when Grant was president, Porter was his executive secretary. Porter resigned from the army in 1873 and became vice-president of the Pullman Palace Car Company, a profitable railroad venture. From 1897 to 1905, he was the United States ambassador to France. In 1907, he was a delegate to the Hague Peace Conference. In World War I, he was a proponent of preparedness and a vigorous policy. He opposed America's entrance into the League of Nations. Porter became well-known as a public speaker; he was responsible for the completion of Grant's Tomb, and in 1897 in New York, he delivered an oration at the dedication of the monument (Mende 1927, 146).

A CHARACTER STUDY OF U. S. GRANT

Porter was twenty-six years old when he met Grant for the first time in October 1863 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Grant was forty-one. The commander occupied a one-story building, situated on Walnut Street. Upon his arrival at headquarters, Porter found Grant in an armchair facing a fireplace. Grant looked tired. He was carelessly dressed; his uniform coat was unbuttoned. He had a cigar in his hand and sat stooped in his chair with his head bent forward. He was wet and splattered with mud. Grant looked

up, extended his arm for a handshake, and said, "How do you do?"

Grant was a small man of about five feet eight inches in height. His normal weight was 135 pounds. His manner was gentle. His eyes were dark gray and very expressive of his thoughts. His mouth was rectangular in shape. His hair and closely cropped beard were a chestnut-brown color. His voice was clear and distinct and musical in quality. He never carried his body totally erect when walking, and he never made any attempt to keep in step with others. When speaking, he usually used only two gestures; one was rubbing his chin, and the other was raising and lowering his hand. He was slow in his movements, but could be quick when pressed by urgency (Porter 1897, 1-2, 14-15).

Grant was always a fairly modest person about his accomplishments. He would most often keep his thoughts to himself. He was popularly known as the "American Sphinx" and "Ulysses the Silent." He did not enjoy small talk, but he could be good in a conversation when talking to a small group of his friends about a general subject. He had an interesting way of pronouncing the letter "d" in two words. He would say "corjuroy" instead of corduroy and "immejetly" instead of immediately. Public speaking was always a terror for him. These speeches had to be impromptu because he could never memorize a speech before giving it. Nevertheless, he gave many fine orations. He had a natural ability for being clear in his expressions, and, at times, he could be very philosophical and original, especially in private conversation.

Grant was particularly clear and direct in his writing. His

thoughts flowed freely. He wrote swiftly and uninterruptedly. His expressions were often original and graphic. His style was epigrammatic. He was famous for statements like "I propose to move immediately upon your works," "I shall take no backward step," "I propose to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer," and "The best means of securing the repeal of an obnoxious law is its vigorous enforcement" (Porter 1885, 587-88). Always in a state of confusion with heaps of paper piled up in every direction, the top of Grant's writing desk was an indication of some of his writing habits. Grant would use his coat pockets as a depository for his scribblings and other important matters. After a while, he would simply dump their contents out on his desk and watch it scatter in every direction (Porter 1897, 242).

Grant's ability to concentrate was often shown by the circumstances under which he wrote. Nothing short of an attack could interrupt him or turn his attention away from whatever he was thinking about at the time. He could be writing important orders or other communications, with officers laughing and talking loudly all around him, and he would insist that they carry on with their merriment; his ability to concentrate was unshakable.

Grant graduated from West Point in the middle of a class of high achievers. He was best in science and mathematics, standing tenth in a class of fifty-two members in mathematics. In landscape painting with watercolors, he stood above the middle of his class (Porter 1885, 589). General Rufus Ingalls had been

Grant's classmate at West Point. Ingalls had remembered Grant as an unassuming fellow, not destined for greatness. He had certain qualities, though, that attracted the attention and respect of his classmates. Grant could be lazy and careless in his studies and in his infantry drills. Often, he would not study a lesson; he would just read it over once or twice, but he was quick in his perceptions. In infantry drills, he received an average number of demerits. He was best known for his common sense, good judgement, unselfishness, and fairness. His classmates, using his initials, nicknamed him "Uncle Sam." He was well-liked by all (Porter 1897, 341-42).

Grant was fond of the theatre and readily made time for current literature. He enjoyed the company of the genteel, but made no pretenses to being of high society himself. His knowledge of the classics was slight, and he had little aptitude for foreign languages. His appreciation for music was a total loss. He would say that he knew only two tunes; one was "Yankee Doodle," and the other "wasn't." After becoming president, he would say later for the sake of humor that he had added a third tune, "Hail to the Chief." During the siege of Petersburg, Virginia, 1864-1865, Grant made his headquarters at City Point, Virginia, just east of Petersburg. Another officer, thinking that Grant would find pleasure in dining to music, would send a band over to play at Grant's mess table. After a few nights of it, Grant made a comment about "that noise" starting up every time he wanted to eat or talk. Another staff officer promptly asked the band to "cease firing."

Grant was a naturally polite person around women, whether he was in public or in the privacy of his own home. Similarly, he was never heard to have used a harsh word with any member of his family (Porter 1885, 590). While he was headquartered at City Point, Virginia, during the Petersburg siege, his wife and four children, ages six to fourteen, would come to visit him. One morning, Porter caught Grant and his two older boys in a rough-and-tumble wrestling match. The younger boy and girl would often hang around his neck and make other mischief while he was trying to work. Grant never scolded them in their fun, but if he became serious about having them behave, then they would obey. Julia Dent Grant was four years younger than her husband. She had been educated in a finishing-school of good reputation in St. Louis. She was intelligent and gracious. On some evenings, she and Grant would hold hands as they sat together enjoying one another's company. When speaking to him, she called him "Ulyss." Before leaving her in the morning, he would often give her a series of light kisses as a way of saying good-bye (Porter 1897, 283-85, 425).

Grant was hurt by statements that he was reckless with human life and that he was insensitive to human suffering. Before a battle, he would always give instructions for the care of the wounded. On an evening during the battle of Shiloh, army doctors were using the only shelter available to treat wounded soldiers. Many of the injuries involved amputating limbs. Grant found the sight so horrible that he spent the night without shelter, out in the rain, sitting under a tree. He understood, though, that war

meant sacrifice and that if hard blows meant an earlier peace and fewer deaths in the long run, then sacrifices would have to be made.

Grant was always ready to rough it in the field like any other soldier. He would usually wear the overcoat of a private, and would often ride hard all day only to sleep at night on the ground without cover (Porter 1885, 591). On occasion, he would return to camp caked in mud, but would seem little disturbed to remain in these clothes for the rest of the evening. He had a fetish, though, about the cleanliness of his undergarments and person. He took baths in either a barrel or a portable rubber tub. When "performing his toilet," he was particularly modest. When bathing or changing his clothes, he would tie his tent flaps together tightly (Porter 1897, 119-20).

Grant ate lightly at his mess which consisted of himself and his staff officers. He enjoyed beef, but only if it were well-cooked; blood destroyed his appetite. He liked oysters and fruit, but these could be scarce on a campaign. He disliked mutton, fowl, game, and chicken. He loved cucumbers and often made an entire meal out of them. He also enjoyed corn, pork and beans, and buckwheat cakes. Alcohol was not served at meals. Drinks included tea, coffee, or water, though, good drinking water could be hard to find. Sometimes, after a hard day's ride in the rain, Grant and staff would have a whisky toddy in the evening (Porter 1897, 213-15).

Grant was a heavy smoker. The greater the stress, the more he smoked. In May 1864, during the second day of the battle of

the Wilderness in Virginia, north of Richmond, he smoked twenty-four strong cigars. Grant had been a light smoker before the battle of Fort Donelson, Tennessee, in 1862. After the battle, newspapers portrayed him as having carried a cigar throughout the assault. Thereafter, he received ten thousand cigars from northerners jubilant over the first real Federal victory of the war (Porter 1885, 591; Porter 1897, 381).

Grant was an excellent horseman. He could also ride in the saddle all day without becoming fatigued. He had good health and never seemed to be in a depressed mood. Though not always possible in a campaign, he liked to get eight hours of sleep in every twenty-four hour period (Porter 1885, 591).

Grant had a conspicuously steady and patient courage. He seemed unaware of the danger to either himself or to those around him. When barely a teenager, his adventuress young son Fred got caught up in the battle of Black River Bridge. A musket-ball to the leg resulted in minor damage. Grant never rebuked the boy for daring to take part in the pursuit of the foe. While visiting at City Point, during the siege of Petersburg, Fred wanted to go hunting. Grant had never like to hunt or fish; he had said that these so-called sports were too cruel to be entertaining. He had once described a bullfight that he had seen as being sickening; he had never liked to see suffering on the part of either man or animal. So, rather than go himself, he asked his negro servant to go along with Fred. On the trip, a Union picket-boat stopped the two, and they were arrested for being Rebel spies. When Fred told the sailors who he was, they

were in disbelief and, in so many words, told him to go tell it to the marines because sailors could not be that easily fooled. Eventually, Fred and the servant were returned to City Point. Grant found the story amusing, and jokingly told his son how lucky it was that he had not been hanged and his body thrown into the Potomac (Porter 1897, 364-66). During a fight south of Petersburg, Grant's horse got his leg caught in a telegraph wire that was on the ground. The spot was under fire, and the enemy was closing in fast. Grant remained undisturbed as he and an orderly worked to free the horse without injuring the animal. As soon as the animal was loose, the group made a hasty exit.

One of Grant's greatest disappointments was the failed mine explosion in July 1864 in front of Petersburg, Virginia. He had not ordered the mine. The mine had been the handiwork of some soldiers in the field. Just ahead of their position, the Rebels had built a fortified line at the top of a hill. The soldiers decided to tunnel into the hill, plant four tons of black powder, and light a fuse. The project took a month to complete. Meanwhile, Grant had decided to use the explosion to make an assault on the Rebels. He put three officers in charge of the operation. When the explosion occurred, men, artillery, guns, carriages, and ammunition went flying in every direction. The result was a crater, five hundred yards long and thirty feet deep, with walls of eighty feet in some places. The Union soldiers charged into the hole, but the debris left by the explosion proved to be their undoing. Their progress was much too slc Rebel reinforcements arrived quickly, and the men

became trapped in the pit. Just as this was happening, Grant arrived on the scene. He jumped off his horse, and, with Porter, the two headed quickly on foot to the point of the assault. Grant was not wearing a conspicuous insignia of rank, and, as he edged his way forward, few of the advancing soldiers seemed to recognize him. Seeing that the pit was turning into a slaughter pen, Grant headed toward his left for the officers in charge; he wanted to give the order to withdraw. Bullets were flying everywhere. The general could have reached the officers, some eight hundred yards away, by passing inside Union rifle-pits, but that route would have been less direct. Instead, he took the high ground and his chances with being killed. Upon reaching the officers, he gave the order to withdraw without any outburst of feeling or expression of regret (Porter 1885, 592-93). Over four thousand Union soldiers died that day in the pit. Two of the three officers who Grant had put in charge of the operation were found to be dead drunk. One of the two was discharged in disgrace. The other was transferred to a remote outpost. The third officer was retired (Boothe 1990, 55).

Grant could show a generous and unselfish attitude toward those who were deserving of respect, whether they were friend or foe. After successes in the West, Grant wrote William T. Sherman a letter of praise. Thanking him for his advice and assistance, Grant said, "'I feel all the gratitude this letter would express, giving it the most flattering construction'" (Porter 1885, 594). After Sherman's successful march through Georgia, there were rumors that Sherman would be offered the command of the army to

replace Grant. Grant wrote to Sherman to tell him that he would be pleased to serve and to support his command. Grant had equal praise for Philip H. Sheridan and the other commanders who had served him so well and who had shown greatness in the field. At Appomattox, Virginia, Grant treated Robert E. Lee with all possible decency. Lee's jewel studded sword, a gift to him from some English sympathizers, was not demanded, the firing of salutes to rejoice in the surrender was stopped, and the opposition were paroled and allowed to take their horses and baggage home (Porter 1885, 594).

Grant had a sense of humor, and, on occasion, would show it. With Richmond, Virginia, as the objective, Grant's command moved into Virginia, from the north, in the early part of 1864. The fighting became difficult. The Wilderness campaign in May resulted in the heavy loss of life. Within a few days, the fighting had moved a little farther to the south to Spotsylvania. Death and destruction continued. The estimated cost of the war was nearly four million dollars a day at this time. Northerners wanted progress and an end to the conflict. It was during the battle of Spotsylvania that Grant was quoted in the New York papers for his since famous statement: "I propose to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer." Within a few more days, the heavy fighting had moved a little farther to the south to North Anna and Cold Harbor. The upshot was that it would be another nine months of siege before Grant could take Petersburg and then Richmond. Winter quarters were established at City Point, Virginia, east of Petersburg, and log huts replaced tents.

Newspapers made note of the preparation for winter. Many of the remarks showed considerable humor. One paper showed the general's hut with smoke coming out of the chimney. The caption read, "'Grant fought it out on this line, though it took him all summer, and has now sent for his stove'" (Porter 1897, 330). Many of these remarks amused Grant and the officers and soldiers around him. During this same period, General Rufus Ingalls came into the possession of a Dalmatian. Dogs were a rare sight in an army in the field, and, this dog, with its unusual markings and aristocratic bearing, never failed to bring out a comment from Grant. One evening, Grant asked Ingalls if he had planned to take the dog into Richmond with him. Ingalls, with his dry humor, replied that he had hoped to, in that, the dog was said to have come from a long-lived breed. The general and company laughed long and hard at the joke (Porter 1897, 329-31, 489).

Grant was at his best in an emergency. He could barely make a living before the war as the owner of a farm located just outside of St. Louis, but, as president, he could negotiate a fifteen million dollar settlement with Great Britain, the Alabama claims, for the damages that the English cruiser brought on northern shipping during the war while under Confederate control. In the late 1850s, he could barely cope as a shopkeeper in his father's Galena, Illinois, leather and harness store, and he could fail to keep from losing his savings in a disastrous banking and brokerage business just prior to his death, but he could put the financial affairs of the national government in order before leaving the presidency.

On the battle field, Grant was original and ingenious. He developed a non-European style of warfare that was better suited for America's dense forests, difficult rivers, swamps, mud roads, and sparse population. He adopted a more open order of battle and made greater use of skirmish-lines. He depended upon his infantry, but put considerable emphasis on his cavalry. He tried to develop soldiers who could think and act for themselves, and he was the originator of the idea that large armies could cut themselves off from a base of supplies and live off the countryside (Porter 1885, 596; Porter 1897, 513).

Grant was an aggressive fighter. He was quick to make decisions and quick to "feed a fight." No one could move fresh troops into position any faster or better. He held every important position that he ever gained. His name became the harbinger of victory.

Grant commanded over five hundred thousand men separated by commands of a thousand miles apart. He moved great armies over vast areas of expanse. He directed George Meade into Petersburg, Edward Ord into Richmond, Phil Sheridan into the Shenandoah Valley, William Sherman into Georgia, Edward Canby into the Gulf coast region, George Thomas into Tennessee, and other armies into Missouri and the Mississippi valley. Though he consulted with his officers, he never called a council of war. His confidence in himself was total and complete. Sherman once remarked that what made Grant such a success was that instead of thinking about what the enemy was going to do, Grant was thinking about what he was going to do (Porter 1885, 596-97).

Apparently, army life on the frontier never led Grant into the use of vulgarities. A "confound it" was as close as he could come to using an imprecation. Grant said that he had never learned to swear. As a boy, he had had an aversion to it, and, as a man, he had seen its folly. He said that swearing only helped to arouse further ire, and that those who could keep their cool were usually the ones who had the advantage in coming up against an adversary. Grant also had a penchant for truthfulness and honesty. In relating even the most trivial of incidents, he would be careful to be truthful and exact in everything said or written.

Grant was raised a Methodist. He attended church services and conferences regularly, and had many friends among the clergy of his own denomination. His attitude toward other denominations was equally positive. He was also known to have made references to God in some of his speeches and correspondence. He had a reverence for all subjects of a religious nature, but refrained from speaking too often about his own religious convictions. He never played a game of any kind on the Sabbath, nor wrote any official correspondence on that day if he could help it. Sunday was a day for rest and worship (Porter 1885, 597; Porter 1897, 495).

In the fall of 1884, Grant developed a seriously painful throat. Within a short time, he was diagnosed as having terminal throat cancer. As the disease progressed, Grant would have episodes of violent coughing and the sensation that he was choking to death. He often thought that if he went to sleep, he

would die of suffocation. Horace Porter visited the dying Grant one last time during the summer of 1885. Grant told Porter that he was not afraid to die. What he feared most was having to go through a long period of suffering. He said that his last wish was to die quickly. On July 23, 1885, Grant died near Saratoga Springs, New York (Porter 1885, 597-98).

CONCLUSION

U. S. Grant had many interesting habits, attitudes, talents, abilities, and other personal qualities. High school history textbooks cover Civil War battles and strategy and the successes and failures of Grant's presidency, but they usually fail to do an adequate job with Grant as a personality. Horace Porter was a close friend and adviser to Grant for twenty-two years. In his associations with Grant, Porter took careful notes for the purpose of later writing a character study of the general. Historians have said that Porter's memoirs of Grant are accurate and reliable. They offer information and insights not found in other memoirs. Teachers and students can use Porter's classic study of Grant's personal characteristics to supplement their high school history textbooks.

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